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SUBJECT: ESTONIA: MERGER OF RES PUBLICA AND PRO PATRIA
UNION WILL BE COMPLETED AT THE BEGINNING OF JUNE

REF: TALLINN 322

¶1. (U) Summary: Estonian opposition political parties Res Publica and Pro Patria Union have completed preparatory work for their merger, announced in early April (reftel). The boards of the parties have approved the merger agreement and a working version of new statutes, both of which will be submitted for approval to party general assemblies on June 4. Res Publica board member Urmas Reinsalu told us he believes consolidation on the right will help minimize the chances of a left-wing Center Party/People's Union coalition seizing power in next year's parliamentary elections. End summary.

¶2. (U) A survey conducted after the announced merger, and published the week of May 8, indicates that combined support for Res Publica and Pro Patria stands at 15 percent, equal to support expressed for the right-of-center Reform party of Prime Minister Andrus Ansip. According to the survey, Pro Patria was ranked third in voter preference with 10 percent support, while Res Publica enjoyed the support of five percent of voters. Res Publica's ratings were up slightly from three percent in March, while Pro Patria has held steady at ten percent support for several months. The Center Party remains the most popular political party in Estonia, with 22 percent support.

¶3. (SBU) In an April meeting Res Publica board member and MP Urmas Reinsalu told us the new party would maintain a "federal" leadership structure for a planned one-year transition. Reinsalu claimed this was partly a result of Pro Patria's fear that Res Publica's stronger leadership would quickly dominate the combined party. Reinsalu added that he hoped it wouldn't be "Yugoslavia-style federalism."

¶4. (SBU) Reinsalu thought the combined party could lose some members on the fringes -- the far right of Pro Patria who saw Res Publica as the "butchers of Lihula" (a reference to then-PM Juhan Parts' forcible removal of a monument to Estonia's war dead in Waffen SS uniform) and the Russian-speaking end of Res Publica's membership. On the other end of the spectrum, an April meeting of Res Publica's heavily Russian-speaking Narva party board had been "hot," according to Reinsalu, but ended with a vote in support of the merger. Looking ahead he thought the combined party would be in a strong position to place second after the Center Party in the 2007 parliamentary elections. The merger had helped forestall a possible left-wing Center Party, People's Union coalition, he thought, that otherwise would have been the likely composition of the next Estonian government.

15. (U) It is unclear who will take the reins of the combined party, though several names have emerged in speculation. Among them are Tartu University Rector and presidential candidate Jaak Aaviksoo, Estonia's Ambassador to the United States Juri Luik, and MP and former Prime Minister Mart Laar. All have reportedly declined the offer, with the exception of Aaviksoo who claims not to have been approached. The Estonian daily Postimees quotes Aaviksoo as saying that he sees "rocks ahead" because the cultures of the organizations are so different, but that should the merger go forward, "Estonian politics will only win in the long run."

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